Hector Berlioz composed his “Damnation of Faust” (“La damnation de Faust”) in 1845 and 1846. It is a work that requires four solo voices, a seven-part chorus, a large children’s chorus and an orchestra. It had its first performance, in Paris, on December 6, 1846. Since its debut—and the dawn of recording technology—the work has been recorded numerous times. But most acknowledge the 1954 Boston Symphony performance, under the skillful baton of Charles Munch, at its preeminent performance. It was this recording—issued by RCA Victor—that was named by the Library of Congress to its National Recording Registry in 2005.

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Though, at his father’s insistence, Hector Berlioz (1803-1869) studied for and became a doctor in his native France, it was in music that he would, of course, achieve immortality. During his long career, Berlioz would write operas, choral pieces and works of criticism as well as pen an autobiography. He also worked as a conductor. His first notable musical work, “Messe Solennelle,” was composed in 1824. Among his most important works are “Symphonie fantastique” (1830), “L’Enfance du Christ” (1853/1854), “Romeo et Juliette” (c. 1839) and, of course, “La damnation de Faust.”

Berlioz was inspired to create the work after reading a translation of Goeth’s poem “Faust, Part One.” He later wrote in his memoirs, “I could not put it down. I read it incessantly, at meals, at the theatre, in the street.”

Since its writing, Berlioz’s “Faust” has been difficult to categorize as a work of music. Though the composition certainly has its operatic elements, since it is not fully fleshed out in its text as an opera, many have questioned if it should be classified as one. Hence, rather than as an “opera,” others have called it more of a “cantata.” Choosing not to wade into the debate, most simply call it a “dramatic legend.”
As noted, Berlioz’s “Faust,” written in 1845, was first produced in December of 1846 at the Opera-Comique in Paris. It received mostly mixed reviews—mainly due to its neither/nor identity.

The original failure of “Faust” dealt a difficult blow to Berlioz. He said later, “Nothing in my career as an artist has wounded me more deeply than this unexpected indifference.”

But Berlioz need not have worried. Despite its disparate debut, “Faust,” the “concert opera,” continued to be performed: in France in 1877 and in Monte Carlo in 1893. It came to America in 1896, when the Metropolitan Opera performed it, as a concert, in New York City. This was followed by a full stage production, also at the Met, in 1906.

Over the years, for many orchestras around the world, “Faust” (however it is performed) has become a perennial—and popular—part of its repertoire.

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Like Berlioz, Charles Munch was a Frenchman, having been born in Paris in 1891. Unlike Berlioz, Munch came from a musical family; his father had been an acclaimed organist.

As a youth, Munch studied conducting in Berlin under Carl Flesch and then returned to France where he served as a professor at the conservatory and concertmaster of the city’s orchestra. In 1938, he was named to direct Paris’ oldest orchestra, the Orchestre du Conservatoire. One of his first performances with the new group was a presentation of Berlioz’s “Requiem.” Throughout his illustrious conducting career, Munch was a champion of Berlioz.

After the War, Munch, moved to America in 1946 after he accepted a position with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Along of course with their live performances, beginning in ‘46, he and the Symphony also began to record for the RCA label. His time in Boston was a celebrated one and, in 1949, Munch even made the cover of “Time” magazine.

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For a presentation of “Faust,” it was time. Nineteen fifty-four would be the 150th anniversary of Berlioz’s birth. Hence, the Symphony had to perform the composer’s best-known work. It would kick off the Symphony’s new season and, to make it extra special, they would bring in for the performance the Harvard Glee Club and the Radcliffe Choral Society. The two choirs’ combined voices totaled 110. Along with those singers, the Orchestra would also bring in a string of first-class soloists: Suzanne Danco, David Poleri, Martial Sigher, and Donald Gramm.

According to reports from the time, this “Faust,” on its opening night, received unanimous praise. The day after its debut, the “Harvard Crimson” stated:

> Berlioz' genius becomes most impressive when his work is performed with the insight of conductors like Charles Munch. Mr. Munch knows exactly where dull spots need his stimulus, and where he can let the phrases take their own course. Moreover, he had the advantage of excellent soloists. Suzanne Danco (Marguerite) and Martial Singher (Mephisto) sang with occasionally imperfect tone, but supreme understanding of how to translate French vowels and consonants into musical sound.

This author also added:

> It is easy to see why Berlioz is called the “father of modern orchestration.” In Mephisto's sardonic serenade, for instance, plucked strings serve as a monstrous guitar-like
accompaniment; in the “Ride to the Abyss,” woodwinds croak like vultures and wild hoofbeats run through the strings.

After its applauded run in Boston, “Faust” played later in the year in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and in Hartford, Connecticut, and then Washington, DC—all to great acclaim. The “Hartford Courant” wrote, “Nothing was done by halves in the performance tonight” and then added, “…the wonder of tonight’s performance was its complete musical handsomeness. It is hard to remember when Mr. Munch in a long history of brilliant and sensitivity was quite so brilliant or sensitive or imaginative as he was tonight.” Similar accolades were showered upon the production as it moved along the East Coast.

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Before the show hit the road though, it was preserved on record.

There had been earlier recordings of “Faust.” It was produced in 1942. Yet, despite the earnestness of the performers on that record, done in Paris under the baton of Jean Fournet, the technology of the time rendered it a less than ideal documentation of this composition.

That was not the case, however, twelve years later, in Boston for Munch and company’s take on Berlioz.

For this recording—captured on February 21st and 22nd at Boston’s Symphony Hall following the debut of the work the week prior--great care was taken by the producers of RCA Victor to obtain the very best recording. As noted in the booklet eventually created to accompany the published discs:

A single condenser microphone, noted for its uniform frequency response and wide angle of sensitivity, was suspended approximately 17 feet above the conductor’s podium to secure an ideal balance among orchestra, chorus and soloists. An auxiliary microphone was used to strengthen a chorus line. The music was recorded on RCA Victor High Fidelity RT-2 recorders at a tape speed of 30 inches per second to assure maximum fidelity and minimum total distortion.

The extra attention to aural detail was worth the effort; the resulting recording drew praise both in terms of its presentation and personnel and for its astonishing sound quality. One newspaper of the era called it, “one of the most important recordings ever made regardless of speed, time or place.” After further praising the “miracles of beauty” that Charles Munch achieves with the Boston Symphony, this same article states: “‘The Damnation of Faust’ is a recording of perfect balance—a new standard for RCA-Victor and a new measure of sound that other companies might well emulate for its realism.”

When released to the public, the elegant package the recording was sold in contained the three, long-playing discs and a detailed booklet containing both notes and a full translation of the text by John N. Burk, a frequent writer on classical music. On the cover of the box, RCA-Victor, printed a painting by Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo. It is one of the artist’s most passionate and abstract of works and was, fittingly, inspired by Berloiz’s “Damnation.” And though it was painted over 100 years after the musical work was composed, it does suit it superbly.

Hence, in 1954, between Tamayo’s vivid colors, Munch’s emotional orchestration, and RCA’s dedication, Berlioz’s masterpiece finally got it truest execution.
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